



The Egg on the Seder Plate



Use this resource as a tool for making conscious food choices at your seder this year. Then, read the following as a Haggadah supplement during Maggid after Rabban Gamliel's explanation of pesach, matzah, and maror. We discuss many items on the seder plate – but the egg is often overlooked.

1. Why is there an egg on the seder plate?

The egg on the seder plate, along with the *zeroa* or shankbone, echoes an instruction in the Mishnah to include at least “two cooked foods” in our seder. The Talmud says the two foods represent two sacrifices, the *korban pesach* (Pesach sacrifice) and the *korban chagigah* (festival sacrifice), that were originally brought in the Temple on Passover.

What does the tradition's choice of an egg as one of those "two cooked foods" mean?

Like the matzah, which represents both suffering and freedom in one food, the egg has taken on more than one symbolic meaning.

On the one hand, along with the parsley or green vegetable of *karpas*, eggs are a symbol of new growth, suitable for this “Festival of Spring.” Passover, the holiday of redemption, is a time of rebirth and renewal, and emphasizing its connection to spring reinforces that meaning.

On the other hand, eggs are a food associated in Jewish tradition with mourning. They are often eaten by mourners at the first meal following a funeral of a loved one; and at the final meal before the fast of Tisha B'Av, eggs are served dipped in ashes. The seder plate egg reminds us of the way we observed Passover in Temple times; at the same time, it reminds us that the Temple has been destroyed, and the spiritual, ritual, and communal opportunities it offered to us are lost with it.

Questions for discussion:

- Which explanation for the egg on the seder plate resonates most with you? Why?
- The egg is both a symbol of mourning and of festivals. Where else do we find dual meaning in the Haggadah?
- What other explanations do you know for an egg on a seder plate?

2. What does the egg mean today?

Just as the egg can symbolize both mourning and renewal, the eggs we choose to put on our table today can reflect either care for living creatures or one of the plagues of our time: factory farming.

Consider the egg on your table: it likely came from chickens living on a factory farm. The vast majority of laying hens in the U.S. are packed into indoor cages where each bird has less area than a sheet of printer paper to live her whole life. Barely able to move, they suffer injuries, disease, and extreme distress. Most others endure similar distress in large, overcrowded barns, never experiencing grass or natural sunlight.

Jewish tradition mandates compassion for all creatures, and the mitzvah of *tzaar baalei chayim* specifically forbids causing animals unnecessary suffering. Mistreating hens clearly contradicts this value.

As people have started learning more about where most eggs come from, many have been disturbed by the status quo and are demanding better. Several states have passed legislation forbidding cruel battery cages on farms, and more states are sure to follow. The industry is on the verge of change and consumer pressure right now can tip the scales.

Questions for discussion:

- Where do your eggs come from?
- What might be other ways we can practice compassion for all creatures as a lived Jewish value?

כל המרחם על הבריות
מרחמין עליו מן השמים
*Kol hamerachem al habriut
merachamin alav min hashamaim.*

Anyone who is compassionate to creatures receives compassion from the heavens.

—Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 151b

3. Passover and beyond: what can I do?

Choose an alternative to the egg: Try using an eggplant, a wooden egg, or another alternative on your seder plate. Use this as a chance to start a conversation at your seder about animal welfare. During Passover, use egg-free matzah and look for egg-free entree and dessert recipes. You can also reduce your egg consumption year-round by buying increasingly available egg alternatives that are also certified kosher, like VeganEgg from Follow Your Heart and Just Egg from JUST.

Buy higher welfare eggs: Labels like “cage-free,” “free range,” or USDA Certified Organic might imply a higher level of humane treatment, but these claims alone do not guarantee higher welfare. Instead, look for the third-party certifiers listed below; visit their websites to see their exact welfare standards. Visit jewishinitiativeforanimals.org/jlc for all higher welfare animal product purchasing recommendations.

BEST CHOICES

Certified Humane + Pasture-Raised



certifiedhumane.org

Animal Welfare Approved (AWA)



agreenerworld.org

Change food purchasing practices at your Jewish institution: Jewish organizations – like your synagogue, day school, camp, or JCC – serve large amounts of food and can make a tangible impact by changing the eggs they buy and reducing the number of eggs served at each meal.

- Join the **Jewish Leadership Circle**, which provides free hands-on support for Jewish communities to transition their food practices and create lasting commitments to more sustainable food choices: jewishinitiativeforanimals.org/jlc.
- The **Hazon Seal of Sustainability** is a great program to support organizations in making changes like these; learn more at hazon.org/seal. And visit the link at the bottom of this page for additional resources specific to eggs.

Learn more at hazon.org/better-eggs and jewishinitiativeforanimals.org.

